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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001136

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/01/2016

TAGS: [PHUM KIRF PREL PGOV TX](#)

SUBJECT: UNREGISTERED JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN TURKMENISTAN  
PLAYING A DANGEROUS GAME

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Jennifer L. Brush for reasons 1.4  
(B) and (D).

SUMMARY

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11. (SBU) Jehovah's Witnesses remains one of the larger unregistered minority religious congregations in Turkmenistan. This is largely by the church's choice: Jehovah's Witnesses is making a meeting with President Niyazov for overseas Jehovah's Witness leaders a prerequisite for submitting its application. The authorities have not yet agreed to this requirement, nor are they likely to do so in future. Meanwhile, although two congregants were detained for three days over the weekend of October 28 (they were released Monday, October 30, several hours after embassy brought their detention to the notice of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), lengthy detentions and detentions involving physical harassment have become the exception over the last year. And, though officials threaten congregants with internal exile, there have not been any cases of this threat being carried out. Post believes that Jehovah's Witnesses may be playing a dangerous game, since there remain strict penalties for non-registration, but given the current relaxed atmosphere, Jehovah's Witnesses may believe that they have most of what they need to worship, less the control that registration gives the government over their activities.

End Summary.

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES MAKE NIYAZOV MEETING A PREREQUISITE  
FOR REGISTRATION

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12. (SBU) The Jehovah's Witness church has not yet submitted its registration application to Turkmenistan's Ministry of Justice, the organ responsible for registering minority religious groups. According Andrei Zhbanov (please protect), a Jehovah's Witness leader and long-time embassy contact, although the application has been completed for some time, the group has decided not to submit it until after the Government of Turkmenistan has approved visas for church leaders based in the United States to come to Turkmenistan and meet with President Niyazov "to discuss the benefits of registration." (Comment: We have been led to believe that this requirement is coming from U.S.-based leaders, rather

than church members here. End Comment.) Although the request has been made, for over two years the Government of Turkmenistan has refused to agree to this requirement and is unlikely to do so in future. Meanwhile, meetings of unregistered groups remain a civil offense.

TWO JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES RELEASED AFTER THREE DAYS' DETENTION

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13. (SBU) Notwithstanding the fact that Jehovah's Witnesses remains unregistered, however, Zhbanov has reported a general relaxation of official harassment against congregants. Two Jehovah's Witness congregants, Andrey Pomerantsev and his wife, Orungul Umirova, were detained by the police October 28-30 after they were caught preaching in public. Yet, the couple was quickly released without any charges or fines hours after the embassy, acting on information received from Zhbanov on October 30, sent in a diplomatic note inquiring about the circumstances surrounding the couple's detention. And, in fact, Zhbanov reported that detentions of more than a few hours -- and beatings and other forms of physical harassment while individuals are in detention -- have become rare in the last year. (Comment: The couple's prolonged detention may have been due to the fact they were detained during the 15th anniversary celebration of Turkmenistan's independence, when most officials were tied up with the ceremonies. End Comment.) Zhbanov attributed the relaxation to the government's recognition that the United States is following the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses here closely and its desire to avoid a spat on this issue.

14. (SBU) Zhbanov also indicated that the police continue to call in Jehovah's Witness congregants individually --

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particularly ethnic Turkmen. While in detention, congregants were questioned about their reasons for "turning their backs on their heritage" and joining the Jehovah's Witness Church; many also were threatened with internal exile in Turkmenistan's most difficult regions. However, to date there have been no cases of Jehovah's Witnesses being sent into internal exile.

COMMENT

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15. (C) Registration has come as a mixed blessing for those religious groups that have registered: although congregants are allowed to worship openly in larger groups and face less harassment, the religious groups have had to accept much more scrutiny of their membership rolls, and stronger government oversight and control over their activities. Some groups, including the Jehovah's Witnesses, have refused to register for that reason. Yet Jehovah's Witnesses may be playing a dangerous game. Given the current relatively relaxed atmosphere regarding religious freedom, Jehovah's Witnesses may have less motivation to go forward with registration, believing that they already have most of what they need to worship, less the government control. However, with tough laws against unregistered religious group activity still on the books, staying unregistered under the pretext of waiting for visas for their headquarters representatives, is ill advised.

BRUSH